

A photograph of the interior of St Albans Cathedral, focusing on the Harrison & Harrison organ. The organ is a large, ornate wooden structure with multiple tiers of pipes and intricate carvings. It is set against a backdrop of the cathedral's high, vaulted wooden ceiling and stone walls. The lighting is warm, highlighting the wood and the architectural details. In the top right corner, there is a small black box with white text that reads: "St Albans Cathedral's Harrison & Harrison, one of the main competition organs".

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# GOLDEN DAYS

The editor reports on the 50th anniversary of the St Albans International Organ Festival

Even the British weather rose to the occasion for the golden anniversary of the St Albans International Organ Festival (IOF) on 11-20 July, the uncharacteristically relentless sunshine serving up a warm benediction on two weeks of top-notch events.

In the 50 years since founder Peter Hurford – with vital support from his wife, Pat – conceived the idea of a festival on the back of a café receipt, this biennial event has grown in both size and standing on the international organ scene. From the early days when potential losses were underwritten by the Hurfords, and also on one occasion by 100 members of St Albans Bach Choir each pledging £5, the scope of the IOF has broadened immeasurably, notably

under present artistic director David Titterton, enabling it this year to mount nine concerts, ten organ recitals, a wide range of Festival*plus* events, and thirteen competition sessions, all within the space of a fortnight and spread over seven different venues. That it unfolded like clockwork is a tribute to the masterly planning of Colin Hamling, the IOF's operations director, and his logistics team led by Michael Bowden.

Concerts nearly all played to packed houses, with audiences turning up to hear pianist Alessandro Taverna, the Gould Piano Trio, the Three Choirs concert (this year with the choirs of York Minster and St Albans and Salisbury Cathedrals), Brecon Baroque under the vivacious direction of Rachel Podger, the National Youth Jazz

Orchestra, Colin Booth on harpsichord, and a challenging presentation by Matthew Barley of cello music with electronics and visuals. Standing out among them all was a compelling performance of Britten's *War Requiem*. A capacity audience listened breathlessly to the intense drama – both monumental and intimate – unfolding beneath the war memorial window of the cathedral, transported on a journey of tragedy and painful redemption by soloists John Mark Ainsley, Wolfgang Holzmaier and Geraldine McGreevy with St Albans Bach Choir, Mosaic Chamber Choir, choristers of St Albans Cathedral (all choirs superbly prepared by Andrew Lucas) and the Britten Sinfonia under the inspiring baton of Sir Richard Armstrong. ►





The combined Three Choirs Concert



Sir Richard Armstrong conducts the War Requiem



David Titterington chats with the jury



Castaway Classics with Susan Landale and Graeme Kay



Sizzling moments with Rachel Podger and Brecon Baroque

◀ No organ festival would live up to its name without showcasing the instrument at its heart. Six jury members gave recitals, Lorenzo Ghielmi playing in partnership with Brecon Baroque, and Stefan Engels making an eloquent advocacy – in words and performance – of the works of Sigfrid Karg-Elert; Sophie-Véronique Cauchefér-Choplin, co-leading the London Organ Improvisation Course (held for the first time in partnership with the IOF), included Widor's Fifth Symphony in her recital in St Peter's Church; and the reintroduction of a Peter Hurford initiative, the Bach Corner, gave four young organists the opportunity to present works by the instrument's greatest composer. Festival*plus* events added a further dimension: demonstrations of their craft by the Institute of British Organ Building; Susan Landale, winner of the first Interpretation Competition in 1963,

talked to Graeme Kay about music that had had an impact on her life and playing; Sir Nicholas Kenyon probed how performers can retain truthfulness to the past as well as bring contemporary meaning to the works of J.S. Bach; and IOF archive material cohabited with the exhibition by local artists in the medieval Kingsbury Barn.

And so to the competitions themselves, the *raison d'être* of the IOF and a potential turning-point in the careers of young organists, with prizes including a season's representation by Phillip Truckenbrod Concerts Artists in the US, a solo recording by Priory Records, recital tours in key venues in Europe and the US, and the chance to join the roster of internationally respected past winners.

As always, a distinguished group of international performers comprised the jury, this year being Stefan Engels (Germany),

Thierry Escaich (France), Lorenzo Ghielmi (Italy), Kalevi Kiviniemi (Finland), Kei Koito (Japan/Switzerland), Susan Landale (UK/France) and Alan Morrison (USA). Fifteen organists from Germany, Italy, Croatia, South Korea, Japan, the US and the UK arrived in St Albans to compete in the Interpretation quarter-finals; and four from France, Germany and the UK (including David Baskeyfield, the 2011 Interpretation winner) for the Improvisation competition.

It was difficult to pick an early winner for Improvisation as the contenders worked their way through set works by Tournemire and improvisations in a variety of styles, the most taxing of which seemed to be the sonata form in the first movement of the final's three movements in symphonic style. In the end, Germany's 20-year-old Martin Sturm – a returnee from the 2011 competition, who had



impressed the jury then with his individualism and flair – had the edge and took the reinstated Tournemire Prize. He told C&O why he came back to try again: ‘It’s such a great atmosphere to work in and to improvise in: you have musical freedom and human freedom – it’s really fantastic. There are some great organs here to practise on and play – they’re inspiring.’

‘I found improvising to pictures in the semi-finals really challenging. I couldn’t translate them into music, so I had to work on the form of the pictures, see the colours, and think what the colours and forms mean in musical terms. So, a bit of compositional thinking, but not too much because you have to improvise. Getting the balance between the two aspects was the most difficult thing, I think.’

‘Winning the competition gives me more freedom to explore some forgotten things in music: to think about theology and philosophy in performing music, not just about music, so that there is a bigger space of thinking in music. Perhaps like Tournemire, who said when recording his five improvisations, “Never mind the microphone; I just play for God.”’

Interpretation competitors performed works by composers as diverse as Scheidemann and Petr Eben (together with trumpet), Bach and William Bolcom on the three competition organs: the Cathedral’s Harrison & Harrison, St Saviour’s Peter Collins, and the Mander organ in St Peter’s. The four finalists had all shone at various moments during the competition, but in the last round it was Simon Thomas Jacobs (UK) who gave the most convincing performance, taking First Prize – and also winning the Audience Prize – with a programme of Messiaen’s *Verset pour la Fête de la Dédicace*, J.S. Bach’s Trio Sonata no.4, Lionel Rogg’s arrangement of Liszt’s *St Francis walking on the water*, and the set work of Bolcom’s Free-fantasia on ‘O Zion haste’ and ‘How firm a foundation’.

Jacobs, a former organ scholar of Clare College, Cambridge, and now based in the US as fellow in sacred music at Christ Church Cathedral, Indianapolis, told C&O: ‘It has always been a dream of mine to enter this competition. I had lessons with David Sanger, who won this competition and was a huge inspiration

and mentor to me right up until he died. I miss him greatly, and he has been in the back of my mind all through this competition. I remember when I was quite young asking him, “Do you think I could ever win a major organ competition?” and he said, “Yes, you’re single-minded enough,” and that has always stuck with me.

‘It’s a huge honour and privilege to compete with so many wonderful colleagues, and to have such an illustrious jury deem my playing acceptable for the international stage. My approach was to get as much learnt as early as possible so I had time to live with the music, understand it, and have the best chance of communicating it when I performed it. At St Albans, the whole point is interpretation – they want to hear you perform; in fact, one of the judges said to me the night before the finals, “Just play for the audience, that’s all the judges want you to do: to play musically and communicate to the audience. Don’t think about anything else.”’

‘There were a few challenges: we all have very limited time on the three instruments and to get used to the space; we had only two months to prepare the commissioned work, and of course no one had ever heard it before; and we only had an hour with the trumpeter for the Eben. But they’re very realistic challenges to the ones we all face as professional musicians. A lot of competition is about stamina and getting on with it – you may not hit all the right notes, you may be tired, but it’s still [about] being able to communicate something to the audience.’

Apart from the two big prizes, there are other opportunities to leave St Albans with an award. Second prize for Interpretation was shared between Anna-Victoria Baltrusch (Germany) and Benjamin Sheen (UK); the Peter Hurford Bach Prize, for the best performance of J.S. Bach in any round of the competition, was won by Jihoon Song (South Korea); the Douglas May Award, for the best performance of a competition work in either the quarter- or semi-final rounds of either competition, was won by David Cassan (France); and the Jon Laukvik Prize, for the best performance of Laukvik’s commissioned work *Aria, Fugue & Final*, was awarded to Benjamin Sheen (UK). The composer commented: ‘When you write a

commission for a competition, you want to give them the possibility to be expressive, as in the first movement *Aria*, working with the swell pedal, getting good registrations, and whether they’re capable of shaping long lines. The second movement gives them the opportunity to show whether they are rhythmical; and the last movement is a technical problem – the fingers have to work well to cope with it. It was interesting listening to 15 different interpretations. I think all of them had very good aspects; for [Benjamin] all three movements were good, especially the *Final* – the way he managed to get a huge crescendo was just breathtaking. The last movement should sound like a tsunami: you’re standing on a hill, you see the water coming and it washes over you – and you’re still there, even after the last chord.’

As ever, the contributions of local volunteers and members of the IOF Society remain vital to the lifeblood of the festival and its satellite organ recital series through the year (see July/August issue, p.66); but this has not prevented the IOF from moving forward into the next 50 years with a professionalism that is not only desirable, but is nowadays expected by performers, competitors and audiences, and absolutely essential for prospective funders. Of the many tributes in the closing speeches, the greatest accolade went to the man sadly absent due to frail health: IOF founder and president Peter Hurford, without whose inspiration and commitment 50 years ago none of this would have been taking place. ■  
[www.organfestival.com](http://www.organfestival.com)



Winning smiles: (from left) Jihoon Song, Martin Sturm, Simon Thomas Jacobs, the Mayor of St Albans and District, Anna-Victoria Baltrusch and Benjamin Sheen